

## OBITUARY

### Frederick Hugh Thompson MC, MA, FSA (1923-95)

My first meeting with Hugh Thompson was in Chester, and thereafter for the next twenty-five years or so we found our paths crossing quite frequently. My initial favourable impressions were reinforced as my knowledge of the man grew, and this must have been true for many others in the city who counted themselves his friends. When he arrived here we were excavating the fortress granaries in Commonhall Street. His support and advice came at a very welcome time, and ultimately he undertook in a masterly way the completion of a difficult but rewarding site. Hugh's arrival coincided with a crucial time for archaeology in Chester. Work on sites threatened by redevelopment had begun under Robert Newstead and revived under Graham Webster, but the increasing extent and speed of clearance and rebuilding was placing a great strain on local resources. Hugh had worked on the 'inside' of state archaeology, and with him began a new era of harnessing funding from central government in partnership with the local authority. The extensive excavations of the 1960s depended heavily on the system Hugh brought into being, apparently (to the bystander) effortlessly, before 1962. The second significant contribution that Hugh made to Chester at this time was as Curator of the museum, for the second half of the 1950s was a pivotal era for the development of the Grosvenor Museum also. With the departure of the School of Art the museum could at last begin to fulfil its true potential, and when I succeeded Hugh as Curator in the early 1960s I was very grateful for the groundwork he had previously undertaken in plotting out a course for the future development of the museum building.

Although his work as Curator was of considerable importance, it is as an archaeologist that most members of the Society will remember him, and his contribution in this area was immense. A sequence of sites, in the main rescue excavations (a term not then invented) in the city, amply demonstrated his abilities as a perceptive excavator, and these excavations were promptly and concisely reported to our members in lectures and in the pages of our *Journal*. Funds for such work, and to support the *Journal*, were hard to come by; Hugh played his part in the Council of the Society in pursuing and securing assistance wherever it might be found, and his contacts in the wider world of archaeology through such bodies as the Council for British Archaeology were of great value. In a number of ways he enjoyed fruitful relations with Chairmen and Secretaries of the Society: Archdeacon Burne and David Morgan Evans (senior) come particularly to mind.

It is with the completion of the great project of the excavation of the Roman amphitheatre that Hugh's name will always be associated in Chester, and with good

reason. After the initial seasons Hugh no longer lived in Chester, but he returned to the city annually for virtually a decade to unravel the details of this remarkable building under the eyes of the local citizens. At a time when extensive rescue excavations were also taking place in Chester it was undoubtedly the research project at the amphitheatre which caught the public imagination. However, it was not widely appreciated at the time that excavation and consolidation of the Roman structure entailed a delicate process of negotiation and subsequent collaboration between the Ministry of Public Buildings and Works, Chester Corporation and the Society (both through its Council and through the St John's House Trustees) – and Hugh occupied a crucial position in this process.

During much of this period Hugh occupied a teaching post in the University of Manchester, where his abilities in archaeology and fieldwork could be given greater play: one of the less attractive projects he undertook at this time (impressive nevertheless) was that of resolving the problems of the partially and badly dug Roman fort at Castleshaw, and publishing the results. During this period many other archaeologists in the region came to know Hugh as the secretary of the regional group of the Council for British Archaeology, a position which may have prepared him for his final and in many ways most rewarding (and demanding) position as Secretary of the Society of Antiquaries of London, which he occupied for twenty-one years until he retired in 1988.

Although he progressed to Manchester and then to London, it was a notable aspect of Hugh's career that he did not lose touch with, or interest in, the places he had worked in or the people he had worked with. As at Lincoln, so at Chester he returned again and again and gave unstintingly of his time and knowledge for all sorts of causes, including, of course, accepting the chairmanship of committees concerned with rescue archaeology in these cities. Hugh's most significant contribution to the archaeology of Chester may, in fact, have been made some twenty years after his departure for Manchester. Provision for rescue archaeology in the city was increasingly beset by problems of various kinds during the latter part of the 1970s, and so an Advisory Group was set up, and Hugh was a founder member of this. Following Kathleen Kenyon's death he succeeded her as chairman, and from this time until his retirement took a lead in shaping Chester's response to continuing threats to its heritage, and in defending the archaeological unit based at the Grosvenor Museum from the inevitable pressures of competing interests both internal and external. In this delicate work he drew on his first-hand field experience in Chester, and also deployed considerable diplomatic skills; the many contacts he enjoyed in the world of archaeology through the Society of Antiquaries were also of great benefit to the well-being of archaeology in the city during this difficult period. In discussing with me this period in Hugh's life, Tim Strickland, who of course worked closely with him at this time, made plain his high regard for Hugh, the great value he put on his advice and support so willingly given, and even more on his active friendship during his tenure of the chairmanship and beyond.

Perhaps in conclusion I might say a little more about the man. I am sure I must speak for others when I say that Hugh was the epitome of all that was best of the system which placed him at Chester between 1955 and 1962. After distinguished service with the Gordon Highlanders in north-western Europe in 1944/5 Hugh went up to Oxford (Exeter College) and subsequently worked as an Assistant Inspector of Ancient Monuments until

1951, when he became Keeper of the museum at Lincoln, at that time a modest position redeemed by the possibilities it offered for fieldwork and research. It was a natural progression to move on to Chester where previous Curators – Robert Newstead and Graham Webster – had been distinguished scholars. In both cities Hugh revealed an active, scholarly, friendly and modest personality which won him many friends. He wore his scholarship lightly, and was able to present the purpose and results of archaeological projects in terms which could be understood by the layman. Anyone who turned to him for advice or assistance (and I speak here from personal experience) could count on Hugh to give of his best in response. I counted him a personal friend, and it was always a delight to meet and exchange news: this I know was an experience shared not only by other archaeologists and Society members, but other one-time members of staff at the Grosvenor Museum. For long the Christmas concerts or pantomimes organised by Hugh and Sheila lived on in Grosvenor Museum folklore.

Hugh was a stickler for prompt publication, and wrote well himself. Of his one hundred or so publications, the titles for which he will be best remembered locally are *Deva: Roman Chester*, a handbook for the museum, *Roman Cheshire*, published by Cheshire Community Council, and his monumental report on the amphitheatre excavations in *Archaeologia* **105** – and each of these is a classic of its kind. Although a modest man, Hugh Thompson had much of which to be proud. By appointing him a Vice President in 1966 the Society expressed its pride in his achievements and its gratitude for his work for Chester. Our sympathy goes out to Sheila in her loss, which we in our way share.

D F PETCH

An obituary and bibliography of Hugh Thompson can also be found in the *Annual Report* of the Society of Antiquaries of London for 1995, pages 70-6. [Editor]

